DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 092 832 CG 008 984

AUTHOR Morris, James D.; Prescott, Mary R.
TITLE Facilitating Transition Groups on the College Campus.
PUB DATE 74
NOTE 12p.; Presented at the Annual Convention of the American Personnel and Guidance Association (New Orleans, Louisiana, April 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Change; College Students; *Counselor Functions; Emotional Adjustment; *Group Therapy; *Marital Status; *Marriage Counseling; Role Conflict; Speeches
IDENTIFIERS *Divorce

ABSTRACT

This article presents a description of the authors' experiences in a university counseling center with therapy groups for individuals who had undergone male-female partnership failure. The impact separation and divorce have on individuals, resulting adjustment stages, and corresponding group goals are highlighted. Common concerns and feelings expressed by divorced individuals are related to changes in their perspectives and behaviors. The intent of the article is to illustrate the value of group therapy in the amelioration of divorce-related problems. (Author)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED 092832

CG 008 984

FACILITATING TRANSITION GROUPS ON THE COLLEGE CAMPUS

James D. Morris
Counseling Psychologist

Mary R. Prescott
Counseling Psychologist

University of Idaho

In recent years there has been a substantial increase in the numbers of married people who are attending college (Mueller, 1960; Sauber, 1971). Approximately one fourth of all students enrolled in American colleges are married (Bayer, 1972). The rigorous demands of college, transient or short-term living arrangements, financial pressures, separation from home and family, differences in intellectual growth of the partners, and role disturbances all contribute to marital difficulties for college students. Many single students choose to live in male-female partnership arrangements, and often suffer the same adjustment rigors as married students. Most partnerships survive the hardships of college, but many do not; and college counseling centers are facing increasing demands for post-partnership counseling (Mueller, 1960).

The failure of a partnership and subsequent divorce often are devastating experiences for the individuals involved (Fisher, 1973; Hunt, 1966; Rose & Price-Bonham, 1973; Waller, 1930). In discussing the difficulties of divorce some authors (Bagby, 1971; Goode, 1956; Haussamen & Guitar, 1960; Hunt, 1966) describe the problems divorced

Paper. Presented at 1974 American Personnel and Guidance Association Convention. New Orleans, Louisiana.

CG008 984

people face in our society which sanctions divorce yet fails to provide a cushion of etiquette or custom for the divorcing individual. Friends of the divorced also have difficulty determining what feelings and behavior are appropriate responses to this change in status. The feelings of rejection inherent in the divorce process are deeply felt by both partners (Bohannon, 1970; Fisher, 1973). The newly divorced person is partly alienated and estranged from the culture around him (Hunt, 1966). Often reported byproducts of divorce are loss of self-esteem, deep feelings of personal inadequacy, and loneliness resulting from disturbance of the roles to which one has become accustomed.

The decision to divorce is usually made over a period of time with considerable emotional stress for both individuals, but the time of the actual separation is usually most painful (Fisher, 1973; Hunt, 1966). Some authors (Ackerman, 1969; Fisher, 1973; Hunt, 1966; Rose & Price-Bonham, 1973) write about the importance of warmth, sharing, and support of others for the divorced person during the critical period prior to and after the separation and divorce.

After the crisis period around the time of separation, there is a need to switch from crisis oriented to developmental counseling. Developmental counseling assists with post-partnership adjustment by which the person comes to perceive himself or herself as a single individual rather than an ex-spouse. During this process reducing feelings of bitterness and hostility, achieving more understanding and acceptance of self, returning to work and social activity, and employing better management of personal affairs and problem-solving efforts are important goals (Fisher, 1973). During the post-partnership adjustment period it is often important for the individual to understand the dynamics of his

former relationship as a potential safeguard against repeating many of the same disruptive processes in subsequent relationships.

In an attempt to meet some of the many needs and resolve some of the problems cited above, the authors have begun group counseling experiences for separated and divorced people at the University of Idaho Counseling Center. The groups were named "Transition Groups" in recognition of changes involved in returning to single life while still making adjustments to the dissolution of the former partnership. In a recent article, Morgan (1974) stated that present trends in group work suggest a growing need for groups designed to accommodate people who are passing through similar life stages or transitions at the same time. Thus the Transition Groups were designed to provide a supportive environment for the mutual sharing of strengths and exploration of concerns for people who are struggling to recover from the loss of a partnership relationship.

Leadership Model

The authors discovered that of the various group leadership configurations the male-female co-facilitator model was most effective for Transition Groups. It was noted by the group leaders that group members would look to the facilitators as role models, particularly in the earlier stages of the group life when members were learning from the leaders to interact with one another in a forthright, nondefensive, nonjudgmental way. Group members often asked questions of the leaders regarding their method of dealing with some problem or situation. The leaders' communication style based on openness, trust, and cooperation could provide positive modeling for these in the process of resolving feelings of anger, resentment, and pain regarding a former

partner. Frequently feelings toward one's ex-spouse were temporarily generalized to all members of the opposite sex, and having a co-facilitator present of that sex to confront the group member about the distortion or stereotyped thinking was helpful in working through the problem.

Most group leaders develop a leadership style which is related to the personality and theoretical orientation of the leader and to the type of group with which the person is working. Co-facilitators too have to work out methods of leadership which are comfortable for each of them and facilitative for the group. McCulloch (1972) used various exercises or games to get group members to work on certain problem areas. Bloomberg and Miller (1971) used a leadership approach which involved their talking openly to each other about individuals in the group or the group progress. This behavior on the part of the leaders was intended to impact the members and redirect the work of the group. Unlike these writers, the authors' style was not to initiate topics for consideration but to follow the conversation and feeling tone of the group with occasional interventions from one or the other to clarify a point or to deal with a problem. These interventions on the part of the leaders were guided by their assessment of group or individual needs at that time and were intended to provide some of the ingredients necessary to the therapeutic growth process.

Transition Group members had characteristically been ready to talk and to work on their problems, a condition noted by Donahoe (1972). Usually participants had many things with which they wanted to deal. Once sharing had begun other members contributed their ideas or concerns about the problem under discussion and were stimulated to ac-

knowledge and voice other problems of their own. The rapidity of movement in some sessions often required a more active stance on the part of the leaders to assure that some members received enough opportunity to discuss their concerns. The co-facilitators also had to intervene when appropriate to assure that concerns were adequately discussed or "processed" before the group moved on to another topic.

Typically during group sessions, one of the co-leaders might be actively involved with a particular person or problem at a given time leaving the other leader free to observe the group process, or behavior and emotional tone of others in the group. Teamwork and sharing of therapeutic responsibility by the co-facilitators was essential, as the problem-process focusing of the leaders changed back and forth in accordance with the needs and flow of the group.

Preparation for and Structuring of the Group

Transition Group members sometimes entered the group after seeking individual counseling at the Center. In an effort to reach the target population of divorcing or separating college students who had not come to the counseling center for individual or marital counseling, an outreach program of advertising primarily using posters and flyers was developed. Unlike the advertising of Crickmore (1972) where the counseling or therapy aspects were played down, the authors' approach was to focus on the concerns of separated or divorced people and stress the importance of supportive sharing and therapeutic problem solving during this difficult period.

Individuals expressing interest in joining the Transition Group were interviewed individually by one of the co-facilitators. During this session intake and screening were done. Individuals whose adjust-

ment or expectations of the group were inappropriate were directed toward individual counseling or other more appropriate resources. After clarification of the client's expectations of the group and eliminating misconceptions, a few general ground rules were outlined including the importance of commitment (regular attendance) and each member's responsibility for getting what he or she wanted from the group. General explanations of group process were also given as a means of reducing the threat potential of the group and the anxiety of the person preparing to enter it.

Rather than meeting in marathon or workshop sessions of one or a few lengthy periods (Bagby, 1971; Crickmore, 1972; Donahoe, 1972), the Transition Group was designed for eight or nine weekly meetings of two hours each during a given semester to fit the operating schedule of a university counseling center. The group was disbanded at the close of each semester, however five or six participants out of the Transition Group population re-contracted to join another group in the subsequent semester.

Group Makeup

A Transition Group experience had been offered during three consecutive semesters and one summer session for a total of 38 participants. In comparison with typical groups sponsored by college counseling centers, the participants in the Transition Groups were older. The majority of college students range in age from 18 to 22 years whereas the average age of Transition Group members was slightly over 29 years, and the range was from 22 to 50 years of age. Contrary to Bagby's report (1971) that most of her group participants were women, the author's experiences

were that nearly as many men as women participated in the Transition Groups at the University of Idaho.

Most of the group participants were experiencing their first separation or divorce, but four or five individuals had gone through more than one partnership failure. Three or four of the participants too, had never married but had separated after living together as partners. The length of time group members spent as partners ranged from less than one year to twenty-five years.

The initial feelings most commonly voiced by group participants were those of loneliness, self-depreciation, guilt, resentment, revenge, and confusion. Reaction to the role disturbance created by the divorce was usually loneliness. The greater the number of specialized roles a man or woman had in his or her marital relationship, the greater the disturbance caused by the separation (Hunt, 1966). According to Waller (1930) certain conflicts stand out:

> "There is the sex need, complicated more often than people realize by a very real love for the lost mate. There is sadly wounded pride, necessitating readjustment, demanding constructive experiences. There are habits, there are worries concerning economic security, there is concern over status in one's group [p. 37]."

Initially a distinction could be made between the outlook and attitudes of the "leavers" (active initiators for the dissolution of the relationship) as opposed to those "left" (the more passive partners who felt they were recipients of the action of the leavers). The difference is most clear in contrasting group member's statements like, "I feel such a sense of relief--as though it's a new beginning" and,

"I feel like a discarded shirt--out of style and no longer attractive, unwanted." Fisher (1973) observed "...who asked for the divorce first and who left whom have tremendous impact on feelings [p. 56]." The authors observed that eventually this distinction became much less dramatic and the feelings of the "leavers" appeared to be very similar to those "left".

Even though divorce is highly individualized, there was a thread of commonality both in reasons for divorce and in reactions to the final breakup. Participants were found to enter the Transition Group with a sense of failure and a fear of something terribly wrong with themselves because of the divorce. Through the process of the group they began to see that it is not a black mark and eventually came to accept responsibility for themselves and deal with the guilt which had been undermining their self-esteem.

Process of the Group

The flow or process of Transition Groups may best be characterized by a change in the time perspective of the group members. The focus of the groups gradually shifted from the pasts of the individuals involved, to their present situations, then to the plans they were formulating for the future.

People's needs during the early stages of the group were for support, sharing of feelings and concerns with those who can empathize and understand, and for a better perspective of their own emotional reactions to the partnership breakdown. The earliest stages of the group were described as the mourning period, and the norms of the group allowed ventilation of feelings of grief, guilt, anxiety, bitterness, and hostility. The goals at this time were to help the divorced person objectively

evaluate and subsequently understand the expectations and disappointments of the marriage, the sort of person his or her ex-spouse is, what led him or her to marry that person in the first place, who emotionally left whom and when, and the part each played in the deterioration of the relationship (Fisher, 1973).

Throughout the life of the group, participants had the opportunity to give and receive feedback (statements about behavior that have been observed in the group). In the early stages of the group, feedback from supportive peers who could speak from their own experience was often helpful. The variety, yet similarity, of group member's experiences frequently provided the opportunity to hear material similar to that expressed by one's former mate from a less threatening individual.

Group cohesiveness was observed to occur rapidly in the Transition Group, and one of the immediate common concerns expressed by members was loneliness and the need to overcome feelings of isolation or alienation. As noted by Rose and Price-Bonham (1973) opportunities to meet and date new people are extremely important for adjustment to divorce. In every group, even though there were a great many indivdual differences, there seemed to be a rapid recognition of commonality of needs and experiences. Common themes such as recognition of unexpressed expectations, denial or lack of recognition of the problems in the marriage until it was too late, lack of commitment to the marriage and to working on the relationship, and failure to communicate one's own needs to the former partner were identified by the authors as emerging in each group. Thus, beside providing warmth and support, one of the tasks of the group was to assist each individual to interpret what had happened. "This means helping him come face to face with the facts of

his life and his emotional and behavioral errors and inadequacies [Fisher, 1973, p. 60]."

Gradually the group participants made a transition from the examination of where they had been to concern with the here and now. This is the time in the post-partnership adjustment when, according to Fisher (1973), a person comes to perceive himself as a single individual rather than an ex-spouse. As one reached this period in adjustment there was greater acceptance of the changes in his or her life situation, and a readiness to begin coping with the practical problems of living. The most prevalent need at this time was developing a satisfying role and life style as a divorced person. Often the need to date was expressed, accompanied by feelings of hesitancy and trepidation. According to Hunt (1966), the resumption of dating for the former partner is very difficult. There is fear of returning to the youthful role of hunting for and impressing members of the opposite sex. Part of the group's function at this time was to help an individual to rebuild one's own psychological framework and life style, which was usually preceded by a clarification of one's values and goals.

The third shift occured when the focus changes more to the future and to life in a more global sense. At this point growth in the individual participants had occured, and they had a better understanding of their former unhealthy feelings, attitudes, and habits. Self-reports suggested that at this stage of group life the members experienced fewer inner conflicts. The social acceptance in the group, the feelings of belonging, the giving and receiving through the sharing of feelings all had contributed to the development of individual self confidence.

Group members began to discuss their thinking about the future,

and if the growth and insight of past sessions had been strong enough by this point, there were indications of better management of their planning and personal affairs in their talk. The group had functioned as a sounding board for the planning of the individual members, and during this period assistance with planning became even more important. As the planning became more specific and individuals began investing in their plans and in the new directions of their life, the need for the group diminished. The focus of the group had changed from a therapeutic mode of increasing self-understanding and behavioral change of the members, to supporting and encouraging individual plans and behavioral styles which had begun to emerge in the last sessions. After gaining confidence in themselves at this stage of post-partnership adjustment, most group members were comfortable in continuing their new directions without the support of the group.

REFERENCES

Ackerman, N. W. Divorce and alienation in modern society. Mental Hygiene. 1969, 1, 118-126.

Bagby, T. K. Divorce groups. The Group Leader's Workshop. 1971, 8, (25/32), 1-3.

Bayer, A. E. College impact on marriage. Journal of Marriage and the Family. 1972, 34, (4), 600 609.

Bloomberg, L., & Miller, R. L. Multiple psychotherapy. The Group Leader's Workshop. 1971, 8, (9/32), 1-8.

Bohannon, P. (Ed.) Divorce and After. Garden City, N.Y.:Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1970.

Crickmore, J. Transition institute. The Group Leader's Workshop. 1972, 15, (3/42), 1-10.

Donahoe, M. Weekend divorce workshops. The Group Leader's Workshop. 1972, 14, (5/45), 1-10.

Fisher, E. O. A guide to divorce counseling. The Family Coordinator. 1973, 22, (1), 55-61.

Goode, W. J. Women in divorce. New York: Free Press, 1956.

Haussamen, F., & Guitar, M. A. The divorce handbook. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1960.

Hunt, M. M. The world of the formerly married. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966.

McCulloch, S. Three self-assertive exercises for divorced or singles groups. The Group Leader's Workshop. 1972, 15, (28/42), 1-5.

Morgan, L. B. Counseling for future shock. The Personnel and Guidance Journal. 1974, 52, (5), 283-287.

Mueller, K. H. The married student on the campus. College and University. 1960, 35, (2), 155-163.

Rose, V. L., & Price-Bonham, S. Divorce adjustment: A woman's problem? The Family Coordinator. 1973, 22, (3), 291-297.

Sauber, S. R. Money and marriage in college. College and University. 1971, 46, (3), 245-250.

Waller, W. W. The old love and the new: Divorce and readjustment. Philadelphia: Horace Liveright, Inc., 1930.